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SF PERUSALS

Airswimming

by Charlotte Jones



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Author's note

Airswimming is a comedy about despair. It was inspired by the various true stories of women who were placed in mental institutions in the 1920s because they had given birth to illegitimate children, or for other spurious reasons such as they were deaf, lesbian or merely "atypical". Some of these women were not released until the 1970s when a lot of the Victorian mental institutions closed down as the great age of pharmacology had dawned. It is a meditation on stasis, on being stuck in a hopeless situation and the salvation that is to be found only in friendship.

The dance and song elements are crucial to the sense of joy that the play can bring in performance. DORA and PERSEPHONE find each other and remain essentially free even though they are incarcerated because of the pleasure and solace they find in each other's company. As Viktor Frankl wrote so movingly in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." DORA and PERSEPHONE manage to save each other and transform into DORPH and PORPH in order to survive.

Charlotte Jones

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Airswimming was first presented by Sweet Desserts Theatre Company at the Battersea Arts Centre, London, on 31 January 1997. The cast was as follows:

Persephone / Porph	**Rosie Cavaliero**
Dora / Dorph	**Charlotte Jones**

Director	**Anna Mackmin**
Designer	**Kirsty Twaddle**
Lighting	**Sue Baynton**
Choreography	**Scarlett Mackmin**

Character list

DORA/ DORPH – female, darker in tone, comical.

PERSEPHONE/ PORPH – female, lighter in tone, comical.

There are options in the playing of the two characters. Both women age by fifty years and are traditionally played by actresses in their twenties – their age at the beginning of the play as DORA and PERSEPHONE. However they could equally be played by actresses in their 70s – the age they are as DORPH and PORPH. In fact I see no reason why they couldn't be played by actresses of any age. There is also the option that the cast could expand to four actresses so that there is no doubling.

Scene One

Lights up.

An institutionalised interior. Drab and hostile. Possibly tiled like a bathroom or swimming pool.

A tin bath. And a staircase or possibly a stepladder. A box.

A picture of a saint (Saint Dymphna) on the back wall.

DORA *is polishing vigorously, whistling.* **PERSEPHONE** *enters with cloth in hand, looking bewildered.*

DORA It's like the trenches.

PERSEPHONE Trenches?

DORA Yes, its like being in the trenches.

PERSEPHONE What?

DORA Here. It's like being in the trenches here.

PERSEPHONE Oh.

DORA You're the new girl.

PERSEPHONE What? I don't know, yes.

DORA How's your elbow.?

PERSEPHONE I beg your pardon.

DORA Elbow?

PERSEPHONE Fine thank you.

DORA Good, here we need strong elbows. We have no need of a nicely turned ankle, an elegant wrist, a swan-like neck. No, here you need damn good elbows.

PERSEPHONE I see.

DORA Lots of elbow grease.

PERSEPHONE Yes.

DORA Bath. You're supposed to clean the bath. Get to it then. At the double.

PERSEPHONE Sorry.

DORA Come on, long bold strokes. We've got to do the floor, the stairs and the bath before four. Trouble is, there's never any proper training here. Wouldn't let it happen in my regiment. Don't like sloppy work.

PERSEPHONE I can't, I mean I never have. I don't know how to.

DORA That's neither here nor there.

PERSEPHONE *(on the verge of breakdown)* I'm very tired. *(pause)*

DORA Ever heard of Catalina de Frangipani?

PERSEPHONE No, no I haven't.

DORA Didn't think so. In 1657 Catalina was training to be a nun, first order of the Weeping Magdalenas. On the night before she was due to take her vows, she escaped the convent, scaling a twenty-foot-high wall. Incidentally she was only four-foot seven. Yes she scaled that mountainous wall and ran away and joined the army. Fought for the Spanish all over South America. She made a lousy Weeping Magdalena you see, but a formidable soldier.

PERSEPHONE I'm sorry?

DORA Apparently she survived on 27 minutes sleep every night. Lived till she was ninety.

PERSEPHONE Oh.

DORA Being tired did not enter into it.

PERSEPHONE No.

PERSEPHONE *starts to clean. Stops.*

It's just that I'm not quite sure where I am. Or why I'm here.

DORA They didn't brief you?

PERSEPHONE What? No. Nobody's told me a thing.

DORA Negative. Well the duty falls to me. You are now an honorary Dymphonian.

PERSEPHONE What?

DORA The new girl. A freshman. A private of course. But you must prepare yourself for a long haul.

PERSEPHONE I'm sorry I don't…

DORA St. Dymphna's Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

PERSEPHONE I'm in hospital?

DORA For the Criminally Insane, yes. St Dymphna's – there she is. *(she gestures towards picture)*

I am Dora Kitson and we are now on polishing duty. The year is, correct me if I'm wrong, which incidentally I never am, 1924. All present and correct. I've been here since 1922. Yes, stationed here July 4th – American Independence Day – funny that. The irony is not lost on me, believe you me. I shall be your superior officer for a while, but don't worry, I'm not one to pull rank. We do this polishing duty for one hour each day. The rest of the time we shuffle and look crazed. They prefer it that way. This is probably the only time we get to talk as they need two of us to do it. They generally leave us alone. The last one was too feeble to do it any longer. To tell you the truth she wasn't up to much. Deaf mute you see. Nice enough soul but talk about blood out of a stone. I'd have given her compassionate leave straight off. No, I need someone with their wits about them. Beleaguered lot here you see. They prefer them with at least one of their faculties missing. Have you got all your faculties, Miss – sorry what did you say your name was? Mm?…You look all right. But then you never can tell. Although usually they've lost it in the eye department. But you can begin to lose it you see when there's no-one to talk to – you know, discuss tactics that sort of thing. I've been there, oh yes I have. Which is why I'm rather pinning my hopes on you Miss…what did you say your name was? …Hoping you're a bit of a wit and raconteur. Liven up the barracks. Well all this waiting you see. Never know when the battle might commence. But you look all right. Good soldier material… Well at least you can speak, not like the last one… you can speak can't you?

PERSEPHONE There's been a mistake.

DORA Ah yes, a fine soprano lurking in there.

PERSEPHONE There's been a terrible mistake.

DORA Very probably. There are always mistakes. But they are seldom rectified.

PERSEPHONE I must contact my father.

DORA No contact with the outside world I'm afraid. But I'm thrilled you're here. I've waited two years for you.

PERSEPHONE You don't understand. I must get a message through to my father. I absolutely must. I have to speak to someone in authority. Can you call them for me?

DORA It won't do you any good. It's better not to make a fuss. I've tried it and I know. Damn nearly court-marshalled I was.

PERSEPHONE Please, you're not listening to me. Please, please I need to speak to my father. Please help me.

DORA All right, there there. Deep breaths and all that. Who brought you here?

PERSEPHONE Well Daddy but…

DORA Your father brought you here.

PERSEPHONE Well Daddy called the doctor you see. I was just at home. In the nursery. Minding my own business. And this doctor came. A nasty, nasty man. He asked me all sorts of impossible questions. I couldn't answer them. I'm rotten with questions you see. I'm not very bright, Daddy says. And I just couldn't answer them, try as I might. And then they restrained me you see. I was jolly upset. All the questions you see. Mind you I put up a fight. Oh yes I did. And Daddy called me a witch. He called me a witch. Then he brought me here. To convalesce, he said. It all happened so quickly you see.

DORA Yes we must learn to be on our guard at all times.

PERSEPHONE Well, I suppose it's only for a short time. I have been unwell. To convalesce, he said.

DORA That's it. That's the spirit. We might as well finish this now.

PERSEPHONE Sorry.

DORA Yes. It's all right. You find ways of getting through it. You won't think so at first. But you will.

PERSEPHONE I'm only here for a short time. I just didn't realize… till I'm better. Just till I'm better.

DORA Absolutely. Would you mind getting some water? Round the corner to the right.

PERSEPHONE Yes, very well. Sorry.

PERSEPHONE *exits. End of Scene One.*

We are suddenly in a new reality. Lights change. It is brighter, less hostile.

PERSEPHONE *re-enters but she is now* **PORPH***, wearing a bad Doris Day wig.*

Scene Two

PORPH Dorph, Dorph. Oh my God. You've got to help me. Please Dorph.

DORPH Porph, calm down, what is it? Slowly. Take deep breaths.

PORPH Oh Dorph. I've never been so scared. This big dastardly man came up. You know with a big black moustache. And a very false smile. And unnaturally white teeth.

DORPH Do we have to go through this again Porph?

PORPH Yes, yes. I was very scared. He asked me lots of questions. And I couldn't answer them. So he chased me. He chased me here and there and over there and under there…

DORPH Yes, all right. What questions? Let's go through this. Tell me. What questions did he ask you?

PORPH I don't know. I'm not sure.

DORPH Of course you know, come on Porph.

PORPH I don't remember – impossible questions.

DORPH Like what?

PORPH I don't know.

DORPH I'm not listening any more Porph.

PORPH No, no Dorph. Very hard questions. The hardest type of questions, Sport and Leisure questions.

DORPH Sport and Leisure questions?

PORPH Yes.

DORPH That's new. Like what?

PORPH Like, "In which sport did Betty Wilson make headlines during the 1950s?" Very hard questions. Especially for a girl Dorph.

DORPH Yes.

PORPH And then he chased me.

DORPH Cricket.

PORPH What?

DORPH Betty Wilson was a cricketer. Fast bowler. Famous for her bouncers.

PORPH Yes all right.

DORPH Am I right?

PORPH I don't know.

DORPH I think I am.

PORPH Anyway, the point is he chased me all over the place and I was screaming and screaming and here's the really weird thing Dorph; no sound would come out of my mouth. And then he tied me to a tree. And I couldn't breathe. And nobody could hear me. You couldn't hear me could you Dorph?

DORPH No Porph.

PORPH And I thought I was going to die. And I was frantic and I was crying, and I was tearing my hair out.

DORPH I thought you were tied up.

PORPH I was… I was but I could just reach my hair. It was slightly longer then.

DORPH And then what happened?

PORPH I managed to get free.

DORPH That was lucky.

PORPH Yes but I'm completely exhausted.

Pause.

DORPH There was no man was there Porph?

PORPH No Dorph.

DORPH And he – that man that didn't exist, he didn't ask you any questions did he? And if he had asked you questions you might have been able to answer them mightn't you? They might have been easy questions mightn't they? And then he didn't chase you and tie you to a tree because, besides that he didn't exist, there are no trees around here, and he didn't have any rope and you didn't need to scream for help and if you had I

would have heard you wouldn't I because, besides that there is nothing wrong with your voice-box, I have exceptionally good hearing and anyway there was no man, with or without a moustache and you have been safe here with me all morning, so you're not in any danger are you Porph?

PORPH No Dorph… Well I'm glad we cleared that one up.

DORPH Good.

PORPH But Dorph, what if I was in critical danger?

DORPH I'm losing my patience with you.

PORPH What if I accidentally fell into a persistent vegetative state?

DORPH I might find it difficult to tell Porph.

PORPH Dorph! What if I was struck by a herd of marauding beasts and I didn't have clean knickers on and then I got sucked into a swamp against my will and then I became a Christian against my better nature and I was forced to wear Lycra and then I lost my vitals and in the meantime my cortex was crumbling and I didn't know the way home?

DORPH You really are a terrible worrier Porph. The worst case scenario doesn't always happen. You mustn't torment yourself. You're here with me and nothing and nobody else matters.

PORPH Thank you Dorph. You help me get through things. I didn't think you could but you do.

DORPH Good.

PORPH Have you noticed? I'm wearing it.

DORPH What?

PORPH My new Doris Day wig.

DORPH Ah, so I see.

PORPH Do you know what?

DORPH What?

PORPH I think it's time for a song in my new Doris Day wig.

DORPH I've got to do some reading Porph.

PORPH Only a quiet one. A lullaby. Doris's million-dollar hit from *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, co-starring James Stewart. Are you ready Dorph?

She sings eight lines from Que Sera Sera "Whatever Will Be, Will Be".

PORPH *sighs.*

What a truly beautiful song Dorph.

DORPH I think it is unrivalled in the beauty stakes Porph.

PORPH And very deep don't you think? I find it oddly comforting, you know. When I'm a little bit down in the dumps. Or under the weather, I just think to myself "Que Sera Sera" and I really genuinely feel a whole lot better.

DORPH Doris Day never skimps on the truth does she Porph? She tells it like it is.

PORPH Thank you for that Dorph… What are you reading?

DORPH A book of spells.

PORPH What's it like being a sister of Wicca Dorph?

DORPH What?

PORPH You know the "W" word… *(she whispers)* Witch.

DORPH Oh you know Porph. It has its ups and downs. You're your own boss. You're not cooped up in an office. But there's not much security. No long-term pension plan; and there's always the risk that your neighbours will duck you in the village pond or burn you to death.

PORPH Yes there is that. Why do people do such terrible things to other people?

DORPH Witches are evil Porph. They're destructive. They cut off male members and eat them for breakfast. They're sexually crazed.

PORPH Well you're not that are you Dorph. You never get it at all.

DORPH I'm not a witch Porph.

PORPH But you said –

DORPH I said sometimes I felt like a witch. It's very different Porph. I just don't trust people any more. It's better if we keep ourselves to ourselves.

PORPH You know Doris has lost complete faith in people now. That's why she founded the Doris Day Pet Foundation. She's dedicated her life to animals now.

DORPH That woman really is a saint isn't she Porph? Let's hope she gets recognised very soon for what she's done for mankind.

PORPH That day is coming very soon Dorph.

DORPH Good. Time for bed. Don't forget to say your prayers.

PORPH Dear Lord; God bless Doris Day and the Doris Day Pet Foundation and let Doris get the Nobel Prize for…Literature or something soon and God bless Porph and Dorph and keep us safe and together forever. Amen.

DORPH Good girl. Go to sleep. I've got some tidying to do.

Lights change.

Scene Three

DORA *and* **PERSEPHONE** *are cleaning, but* **PERSEPHONE** *in a very half-hearted way.*

DORA Good morning. It could be worse we could be on laundry duty.

PERSEPHONE *ignores her.*

Yes, they've got quite a system going there. *(pause)*

The delirious wash, the imbeciles carry the linen to dry, the melancholy iron it and the monomaniacs fold it and put it away. And we have to sleep on those sheets. No wonder we all have nightmares. Yes, it's a shame. After all even nutters need their beauty sleep, what do you think?

PERSEPHONE What are you?

DORA I'm sorry?

PERSEPHONE What's wrong with you?

DORA Nothing.

PERSEPHONE Why are you here then?

DORA Why are you here?

Silence.

It's hard at first, I know. But you have to keep focussed. Like Joan of Arc. Incarceration didn't get her down. She took it like a man. Refused to wear frocks. Had a short crop. They thought it was deviancy. I try to be deviant whenever I can. *Vive la deviance.*

PERSEPHONE Are you mad?

DORA I beg your pardon?

PERSEPHONE Criminally insane. Well I assume you are. You seem to be.

DORA Certainly not. I resent the suggestion. Criminally insane. The idea of it! Unless a predilection for Spanish cigars counts.

PERSEPHONE What?

DORA That's what first got them alerted to me. To my deviancy. I enjoyed the odd smoke. Shouldn't have done it. It's not de rigeur. But whether it's criminally insane. That's a different matter. What do you think, Miss – ummm?

PERSEPHONE About what?

DORA Smoking cigars.

PERSEPHONE I think it's perfectly foul. I can't believe anyone in their right mind would want to.

DORA Ah typical woman. There are pleasures in this world that you know nothing of.

PERSEPHONE Well I'm rather glad. Life isn't supposed to be all pleasure.

DORA Ah indeed you are so right, Miss – umm. In fact you have inadvertently hit upon our little motto here. What is the Latin now? *Vitam sine pleasurae* or some such. Life without joy. We Dymphonians live by that. Not that we feel sorry for ourselves, oh no. They also serve who only sit and polish. I can see you're going to fit in here, Miss Ummm –

PERSEPHONE I'm not here for long.

DORA Oh.

PERSEPHONE No. I'll be leaving any day now. They're coming back to get me you see. So there's no point getting your hopes up about me. I'll be leaving you very soon.

DORA Ah, what a shame.

PERSEPHONE Yes, isn't it. But it can't be helped I'm afraid. I'm coming out very soon you see. Before the King. My parents are arranging a huge party at the Dorchester. I'll be dressed in white satin from head to toe. So I can't possibly miss it. It will be the most important day of my life. Apart from my wedding day. So I have to be there. In the meantime I just have to sit tight. Get strong. This is just my convalescence home – I'd have preferred Geneva or somewhere Swiss. I can't understand why they chose here. But ours is not to reason why, what will be, will be, Mummy always says.

DORA Does she now?

PERSEPHONE Yes, like one time I wanted this hat. It was huge and pink with big squashy flowers all over it and I thought it was the most beautiful hat in the world but looking back on it it was rather vulgar but at the time it would have made me very happy but Daddy said I couldn't and I was so vexed I cried and cried and all Mummy said was, "Ours is not to reason why, Persephone Baker, what will be, will be." Which I found oddly comforting at the time although it would have been better to have the hat I think, in fact, looking back on it it wasn't comforting at all and I should have had the hat even if I never wore it. I said to Reggie – *(looks at* **DORA***)* – well it doesn't matter. I didn't get the hat and now I'm here we're not allowed to have pretty hats so maybe it's just as well. Although I shall need one for my coming out. So I'll just sit tight. But don't get it into your head that I'm staying. Because I'm not. I expect they're coming any day now. At the end of the week probably. A fortnight at the most… *(she trails off)*

Pause.

DORA Persephone Baker.

PERSEPHONE What?

DORA Your name.

PERSEPHONE What about it?

DORA Nothing. I just didn't know it. You hadn't told me. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Baker.

PERSEPHONE Yes. Well. It won't be for long.

DORA No clearly. We'd better get down to this then. Sharpish. Before you get whisked away.

PERSEPHONE Yes, we'd better.

DORA Yes like Persephone to the Underworld, Hades will return and take you thither.

PERSEPHONE I beg your pardon?

DORA The Greek myth, you know… Well we'd better get on with this.

PERSEPHONE Oh. Yes.

DORA And by the way, Miss Baker you have a lovely voice. Music to my ears.

PERSEPHONE Oh right. Thank you.

DORA Yes. Feel free to break into song at any time.

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